Charlotte Bank*

# Painting as Critique: Oil Painting as a Site for Social and Political Negotiation in Syria

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**Abstract:** Oil painting in the European manner was closely linked to questions of modernity in the Arab world and was often intimately connected with discussions pertaining to national independence and social progress. By reference to the work of the early Syrian painter Tawfiq Tarek, this article discusses oil painting in Syria as a site to negotiating questions of modernity and social and political change. As was the case with his peers from other Arab countries, Tarek, despite having received his training in Paris, was not interested in the avant-garde art movements that sought to disrupt artistic traditions, but preferred to remain within established, academic genres. For him, genres such as history painting and even Orientalism served to convey subversive political messages and declare his commitment to progressive and nationalist ideas, thus linking him and his work to notions of "committed" art.

**Keywords:** Syria, modern art, committed art, painting, pioneers

## 1 Introduction

European-style oil-on-canvas painting was taken up in the Arab world at the end of the nineteenth century and proliferated in the first half of the twentieth. Its practice should be seen in light of the lively discussions that were taking place during that time among intellectuals and civic leaders on the subject of modernity. Much attention was given to the question which changes were necessary if a society was to "become modern". The visual environment underwent substantial changes in the course of this modernization process: In the public sphere, the re-organization of the urban space and the erection of public monuments came to be regarded as essential indexes of modernity and as indispensable for any "modern" nation. In the interior space, images became important decorative features, whether this took the shape of a painted or photographed portrait, a painting or a fresco. In Damascus, the latter often depicted modern inventions such as steamboats, factories and railways or referred to current events such as

***Corresponding author: Charlotte Bank,** Unité d'arabe, University of Geneva, Boulevard des philosophes 22, CH-1205 Geneva, Switzerland. E-mail: charlotte@charlottebank.net

the Paris Commune or natural disasters, as patrons were eager to stress their connectedness to the wider world.[1]

An important aspect of this process of societal "modernization overhaul" was the feeling that the Arabs were somehow "lagging behind", that they had to become "modern" and needed to prove that this was indeed possible in order to gain independence from colonial powers, whether Ottoman or European. Oil painting, its practice and appreciation came to be seen as a necessary prerequisite to achieve modernity and as such it was closely linked to the national liberation discourse. This role of oil painting has received some attention in relation to countries such as Egypt, Iraq and Lebanon. But as Anneka Lenssen has pointed out, very little attention has been paid to painting in Syria in the context of negotiations of national identity and historical change within modernity.[2] Yet, since the first generation of oil painters, the so-called *ruwwad* (pioneers), artists in Syria had been strongly engaged in the intellectual discussions of their day, within which the questions of modernity and how this was to be to accomplished were paramount. And some artists in Syria sought through their artistic practice to propagate positive change in their society. Following this line of thought, the present article will focus on the practice of one of the early oil painters in Syria, Tawfiq Tarek,[3] and discuss how his work and intellectual outlook relate to notions of "committed art" and the artist as a "committed" member of society.

The most common readings of the history of art in the Arab world tend to regard the transition of the Arab countries to independence as constituting a more or less categorical break, separating the practice of artists of the independence era from that of the *ruwwad*. Thus, Silvia Naef defines two major periods, one of "adoption" corresponding to the *ruwwad* generation and one of "adaptation", roughly corresponding to the post-independence artists.[4] In this article, while not refuting this notion, I will take a slightly different approach and focus on one aspect that allows us to identify a certain continuity, traceable

**1** Naef 2003. See pages 189–190 for a brief outline of the general changes in the visual realm. On mural paintings in Damascene houses, see Weber 2002. See pp. 165–166 for a discussion of depictions relating to the Paris Commune and volcanic eruptions, pp. 168–169 for depictions of symbols of modern life. Tariq Al-Sharif mentions that framed paintings came to replace traditional ornamentation in private homes. See Al-Sharif 1984–85: 8. For a discussion of practices of wall and ceiling paintings with similar motifs in Beirut and the Levant, see Barakat 2003: 133.

**2** Lenssen 2014: 9.

**3** Throughout this article, I adopt the most common spelling of the artist's name as it appears in art publications. Other spellings are: Tawfik Tarek (appears quite often) and Taufiq Tareq. The correct transliteration would be Tawfiq Tariq.

**4** See for instance Naef 2003: 189; Naef 1996: 13–15.

throughout the history of art in Syria.[5] Through the example of the above mentioned Syrian painter, I will discuss how art in Syria has been deployed to take a critical stance towards social and political issues and how this connects artistic production in Syria with ideas of "committed" art as they were later formulated, in the Syrian as well as the European context. While the notion of "committed art" (*al-fann al-multazim*) is somewhat problematic in the Arab context, as it was often strongly ideologically coloured, I am using the term to describe a general stance of engaged positioning on the part of the artist vis-à-vis his/her time and society.

Researching the lives and works of early Arab artists remains challenging for the researcher. One of the main obstacles is the scarcity of written sources and their often conflicting character. I have tried to verify and cross-check the data available to me at the time of writing, while also mentioning inconsistencies and conflicting data. However, many aspects of the life and work of Tawfiq Tarek remain unclear and will need further research.

## 2 The introduction of oil painting in Syria

Even though the territory of modern Syria was ruled by foreign powers, Ottoman and French, until independence in 1946, the local elites strove to follow cultural developments in the imperial capitals of Istanbul and Paris. Thus, the discourses of modernity and related practices that were unfolding in those cities were not unfamiliar to the educated upper classes of Syrian cities. The understanding and appreciation of painting became an important index of a "modern" outlook and commissioning painted oil portraits and murals for the walls of the formal rooms of private houses became a common practice.[6] But art was not only appreciated passively, its active practice also gained in importance. Thus, from the nineteenth century onwards, a few Syrian and Lebanese artists went to Europe or to Istanbul to study art.[7]

One of the first notable artists from Syria who is credited with having exercised a considerable influence on subsequent generations of artists in Syria was Tawfiq Tarek (1875–1940). His prolific production has secured him an important place in the history of painting in Syria as one of the main figures

**5** This constitutes the central argument of my PhD thesis: Bank, Charlotte: *The emerging contemporary art scene in Syria: Between the tradition of social critique and a contemporary artistic movement in the Arab World* (working title), University of Geneva (forthcoming).

**6** Lenssen 2014: 19; Weber 2002: 146–147.

**7** For an (unverified) list of artists' names, see Maari 2006: 94–95.

of the *ruwwad* generation. Tarek received his artistic training in Paris, from where he graduated in 1901 and returned to Damascus.[8] His style closely follows European styles and is related to the naturalist, realist and Orientalist schools. As I will discuss later on, work such as Tarek's, like that of other *ruwwad*, has often been regarded as derivative and lacking in originality by later art historians and critics, often writing from an ideological and/or nationalist perspective. However, I would like to argue that the paintings of this particular artist were produced with very clear objectives in mind and with a political and social commitment related to the time and society he was living in. While his paintings closely followed European models on the formal level, Tarek's subject matter was closely linked to his advocacy of national independence and his concern with contemporary issues in Syrian-Arab society. I suggest that this aspect of Tawfiq Tarek's work places it in close proximity to the idea of "committed art" that gained a great importance later in the twentieth century. The works of another early artist, Michel Kirche, 25 years younger and like Tarek trained in Paris, display a much less outspoken nationalist and committed stance and instead concentrate on portraits and "impressionist"[9] renderings of Damascene street scenes and landscapes. While Tawfiq Tarek also produced portraits as well as architectural motifs and landscapes, the present article focuses on works that are closely related to his social and political commitment.

Although the two Syrian painters mentioned had received at least part of their training in France, the French mandate authorities do not appear to have had any great interest in promoting Syrian fine artists. Their major concerns in the artistic field lay elsewhere. While artists' training had been less organized prior to the French occupation, important changes in the organization of education in artistic and cultural matters took place during the French mandate period. As part of its re-organization of Syrian society and its introduction of modern modes of knowledge production and representation, the French authorities created the *Institut français d'archéologie et d'art musulman* in 1922.[10]

**8** Sawwan 2011. See below for a discussion of the problems of conflicting biographical information. According to non-verified information from the German-language Wikipedia-page on Tawfiq Tarek, he returned to Damascus in 1905, https://de.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tawfiq_Tarek, accessed 23 October 2015.

**9** While the term "impressionist" is widely used for a wide range of works by Arab "pioneers", it is important to remember that these works do not incorporate the optical scientific and avant-garde aspects of French Impressionism. Michel Kirche is often credited with having introduced "Impressionism" to Syria. See e. g. Bahnassi 1974: 13. For a discussion of the term "impressionist" in relation to Ottoman painters, see Shaw 2011: 181.

**10** In 1930 the name was changed to "Institut français de Damas" and in 1947 it became the "Institut français d'études arabes de Damas", Maari 2006: 97.

Located in the 'Azm Palace[11] in Damascus, the aim of this institution was to create a centre that incorporated a museum and a library, organized exhibitions, lectures and courses and would serve as host to visiting artists and scholars.[12] In 1924, the French painter Jean Charles Duval was invited by the French High Commissioner, General Weygand, in 1924 as the first holder of an artist's grant to stay at the institute and undertake travels throughout the country to paint its archaeological and historical sights.[13]

The encouragement of modern oil-painting techniques was not among the priorities of the French Institute, it was rather focused on efforts to revive the traditional Damascene art and handicraft. This was seen as an "authentic" artistic expression that had fallen into a state of stagnation and was in need of being brought back to its former "pureness and refinement".[14] But despite the minor role accorded to modern drawing and painting techniques by the French authorities, the visits of French and other European painters seem to have had an invigorating effect on the local art scene.[15]

While Syrian artists mostly had to rely on less well-organized training by working in the studios of older artists and relying on peer exchange, some efforts were made to create artistic societies that could offer occasions for art-related meetings. In the 1930s, Tawfiq Tarek started an art association with a group of artists from different fields[16] and in 1941 a small group of artists established a new venue for debates and presentations of art, the "Studio Veronese". The latter's activities comprised painting from life models and meetings and discussions centred on different issues related to art, philosophy and modernism.[17] Out of this association emerged the "Arab Association for the Fine Arts" (*al-Jam'iyya al-'arabiyya li-l-funun al-jamila*), which saw it as its mission to promote a distinct role for the arts and artists in a future independent Syrian state.[18] Academic oil painting was, in contrast to Europe, not seen as a merely intellectual, aesthetic pursuit but rather as an important civic instrument and a necessary feature to achieve both modernity and national independence.[19] It was not until 1959 that a genuine art school was established

**11** In French publications the name of the palace is usually written "Azem".
**12** Avez 1993: 23. The foundation charter does not specify the nationality of the invited researchers, nor any of the selection criteria.
**13** Dussaud 1927: 248–253.
**14** Maari 2006: 98.
**15** Shabbout 2007: 20, Al-Sharif 1984–85: 10.
**16** Sawwan 2011.
**17** Lenssen 2014: 30.
**18** Lenssen 2014: 32.
**19** Lenssen 2014: 13, 20.

in Syria, much later than other Arab states.[20] The Institute of Visual Art in Damascus was inaugurated in 1959, during the period of Union with Egypt in the United Arab Republic (1958–1961) and was re-named College of Fine Arts *(Kulliyyat al-funun al-jamila)* in 1963 when it was re-conceived as a degree-granting faculty.[21]

## 3 The reception of *ruwwad* painters in later literature

The available literature on the *ruwwad* painters in Syria and in the Arab world generally presents the researcher with numerous challenges. One problem is the lack of in-depth analysis in many discussions of the works of *ruwwad* painters and the often somewhat dismissive views expressed by later art historians, critics and artists. Another major difficulty is the scarcity, inaccessibility and obscurity of biographical data. Furthermore, not only is data scarce, the information is often conflicting. Thus, different dates might appear for the same life events and frequently, sources are not cited. This means that each endeavour of collecting information resembles an archaeological process of unearthing, gathering and comparing fragments.

The treatment of the *ruwwad* generation by later Arab art historians and critics has often been somewhat severe. As Silvia Naef notes in the case of Egyptian art historians, the *ruwwad* artists were criticized for blindly accepting everything from Europe and for not displaying any "Egyptian-ness" in their work, thereby leaving out any consideration of the cultural context of these artists' work.[22] They were criticized for being "bourgeois" and even for "deficits in their disposition".[23]

Such severity is largely absent from Syrian art historians' and critics' discussions of Syrian *ruwwad* painters. However, the stress is also here on the imitative character of their work, and the innovative agency of the Syrian *ruwwad* artists is limited to the fact that they turned towards Europe in their search for a new artistic language, while dismissing the radical modern art movements in Europe. Later Syrian art historical writing on the *ruwwad* artists

**20** The first art academy to open in an Arab country was Cairo in 1908, Beirut followed in 1937 and Baghdad in 1941.
**21** Lenssen 2014: 218, 286.
**22** Naef 1996: 75–76.
**23** Naef 1996: 77.

focuses on a few artists deemed important, the discussion of their work is more descriptive than investigative and analytical and the socio-cultural and political context is hardly taken into account.[24]

Afif Bahnassi writes that the first Syrian artists started practising art by "imitating" European artists and describes the works of Tawfiq Tarek as either faithful copies of the original or regroupings of elements of European paintings.[25] Tariq Al-Sharif acknowledges the innovative force of the *ruwwad* generation on the art scene in Syria. It was their generation who brought European-style painting to the country, at a time when the traditional arts no longer seemed to satisfy society's needs. However, he maintains the view that the strength of these artists lay in the careful imitation of European art in its "traditional" (i. e. academic) style, in their attempts to absorb the imported language.[26] In other words, these artists' technical skills in learning a foreign visual language might be acknowledged, but the agency of these artists in seeking training far from home is largely dismissed. As Kirsten Scheid notes in her discussion of nude paintings by early Lebanese painters, such views trivialize the exercise of choice in the artists' effort to master fine art.[27] They also disregard any deeper motivations for the choices of *ruwwad* artists in terms of styles and subject matter.

As noted in the introduction, later writings about the lives and work of *ruwwad* artists often display numerous inconsistencies. Biographical data are scarce and often of a highly anecdotal character. Texts about Tawfiq Tarek are no exception.[28] However, the following seems fairly certain.

Tarek was born in 1875 to a well-to-do family of military officers (both his father and his grandfather had been Ottoman officers) and completed his secondary schooling in Istanbul, after which he entered the Military Academy of Istanbul in 1893.[29] Oil painting was incorporated into the curriculum of Ottoman military primary and secondary schools in the nineteenth century, and although it was designed primarily for military purposes some well-known

**24** For a discussion of similar problems related to late Ottoman art by later Turkish and Armenian art historians, see Davidian 2014: 11.

**25** Bahnassi 1974: 10, 11.

**26** Al-Sharif 1984–85: 7, 8, 13.

**27** Scheid 2010: 201.

**28** For an example of a text full of sometimes entertaining anecdotes see e. g. Qashlan 2006: 14–20. Other sources of brief biographical data are: Atassi 1998: 65; Ali 1997: 87. Walid Sawwan mentions a book by 'Abd Al-Aziz 'Alwan that was in the process of being written in 2011. However, I have not been able to locate the book and neither the Damascene gallerist Mouna Atassi, nor the Beirut gallerist Saleh Barakat knew about it. See Sawwan 2011.

**29** Qashlan 2006: 18.

artists had taught in such schools.[30] According to Tariq Al-Sharif he was influenced by Ottoman artists and their carefully constructed, "documentary" style. However, nothing definite is known about the role of this training in inspiring Tawfiq Tarek to pursue an artistic career.[31] He was imprisoned in 1893 for his involvement with a nationalist political group, but was released on condition that he left Istanbul.[32] He received asylum in Paris in 1895, where he studied drawing, land surveying and urbanism at the Ecole des Beaux Arts, graduating in 1901.[33] Upon his return to Damascus, he worked as an architect and topographer and was involved in restoration work on several historic buildings in the city, whilst continuing to paint all along. He was imprisoned during the First World War, but was either released soon or able to escape.[34] After a controversy surrounding an art prize, he seems to have left Damascus in 1926 for Beirut and after that spent his time alternating between the two cities until he died in Beirut in 1940.[35] He was buried in Damascus.[36]

Unfortunately, the cited literature does not provide information about the reception of Tawfiq Tarek's work among his contemporaries, but they do mention his intellectualism and his "cultured mind". He was the first artist to open his studio to students and the interested public, trying actively to inspire a lively and informed art and culture scene.[37]

## 4 From harems to historic battles: Tawfiq Tarek and commitment to change

The dominant view among Arab intellectuals in the late nineteenth and early twentieth centuries was that only a radical break with traditional culture would ensure that the countries of the Arab world could leave behind the state of stagnation that they were perceived as having fallen into and thus achieve true

**30** Shaw 2011: 31.

**31** Al-Sharif 1984–85: 14. According to one source cited in Lenssen 2014: 24, he might have studied briefly with the Russian-Armenian artist Ivan Aivazovsky, who appears to have been invited to Istanbul on several occasions between 1857 and 1890. See also Shaw 2011: 21.

**32** Qashlan 2006: 18. Sawwan 2011 gives the date 1992.

**33** Qashlan 2006: 18.

**34** The circumstances of his imprisonment seem to have given rise to numerous anecdotes. See e. g. Sawwan 2011.

**35** Qashlan 2006: 18.

**36** Sawwan 2011; Qashlan 2006: 18.

**37** Al-Sharif 1984–85: 10.

modernity.[38] This was to happen through a process of *enculturation* referred to as *tathqif*,[39] a process that, among other things, foresaw reviewing norms for social modes of behaviour and interaction. The critique and repudiation of certain customs associated with the Arab past was an important aspect of these efforts, as many of these were seen as major causes of Arab and Muslim backwardness. This was especially so with practices of male homosexuality and polygamy.[40] Fine art, its practice and appreciation took an important role in this process and artists understood themselves as playing a crucial role in this "civilizing mission". Intellectuals and civic leaders were intent on nurturing the understanding of fine art among the intended audience and encouraging the cultural transformation on its way. A prominent role in this "enculturing" process was held by the Scout movement, whose leaders and patrons organized exhibitions and educational events with the aim of instilling love for fine art in the "cultured class". This term refers to those strata of society who, like the artists, hailed from upper and middle-classes, had the resources to participate in *tathqif*, but who might not have already been doing so.[41]

In the case of Syria, the medium of oil painting was closely related to the struggle for national sovereignty. And following national independence in 1946, modern painting also became a site to negotiate national identity, and to comment on current political and social circumstances. But, paralleling Wendy Shaw's observation on Ottoman painting, the art that emerged during the early period as a prerequisite of Arab modernism was not modernist, "in the sense of fitting with art movements that aimed to destroy artistic traditions and radically reconfigure perception".[42] Ottoman art (and with it the art being produced by artists from the Arab provinces of the Empire) adopted European-style art practices as part of the local project of modernization, in an effort to "catch up" with the European development.[43]

Fine art in the context of Syria and the Arab world in general was inevitably linked to national, societal and cultural concerns and the idea of an art that was disinterested and detached from these questions hardly ever arose. Thus, for Syrian, as for other non-Western artists working in contexts of de-colonialization, the questions of artistic autonomy and "l'art pour l'art", notions that might have been of great importance in Europe, were less pressing and of entirely

**38** Naef 2003: 192.
**39** For a discussion of the term *tathqif*, see Scheid 2010: 203.
**40** Naef 2002: 221; Scheid 2010: 203.
**41** Lenssen 2014: 27; Scheid 2010: 209–210, 218.
**42** Shaw 2011: 3.
**43** Shaw 2011: 3.

different dimensions than in the European setting.[44] Considering this context of art production in the Arab world allows for a slightly more nuanced view on the stylistic choices of the *ruwwad* painters than the one prevailing in the texts discussed above. So, while Tawfiq Tarek, like his peers, adhered to a strongly academic style on the formal level, I would like to argue that he very consciously adapted modes and genres of European painting, such as Orientalism and history painting, to his specific needs and used them to voice his critique of contemporary Syrian-Arab society. As his works testify, Tawfiq Tarek was familiar with major discussions going on among Arab intellectuals, and nothing indicates that this was not also the case with debates taking place in the French capital at the time of his stay. When his artistic choices did not follow the French artistic avant-garde and could be considered "conservative", this should not be seen as a lack of knowledge of the progressive art movements. It should probably rather be seen in light of the role ascribed to Arab artists, often by themselves, as being major bearers of modernity and progress. It was in the academic genres that he found the models most suited to convey his intended messages to the audience. Through his paintings, he called upon his compatriots to reflect on the lessons offered by Arab history and their relation to the present. Thus while Tarek's paintings might superficially appear conventional, as he worked within genres that were not commonly associated with critique, he did so with the definite intention to subvert and re-purpose them. His choice of genre seems to have been very conscious and rooted in a wish to offer an accessible critique of social and political conditions.

In this way, Tawfiq Tarek can be regarded as a "committed" artist. The term "committed" (French *engagé*) refers to a particular political positioning of the artist, expressed in his artistic work and public utterances. Following the definition by Pascal Ory and Jean-Francois Sirinelli in their 1986 study of French intellectuals (especially writers) of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries, this does not present itself as occasional expressions of opinion on current political affairs. Rather it is inseparable from the person of the artist and is visible in all aspects of his/her work. He/she thus becomes an active participant in the affairs of his/her time, just as literature reflects the time of its creation.[45]

The painting *Abu 'Abd Allah as-Saghir* (1322 AH/1903-04)[46] is a meticulously painted piece that closely follows its source of inspiration, a painting by the

**44** For a discussion of the political dimensions of modern painting in Syria in its international context, see Lenssen 2014: 38–49.

**45** "[…] la littérature est insérée dans son temps, elle est donc mémoire; le littérateur est engagé, il est donc acteur", Ory/Sirinelli 1986: 147, 149.

**46** Atassi 1998: 66. Dimensions: 100 × 80 cm. Oil on canvas.

French Orientalist Paul-Louis Bouchard (1853–1937), *Les almées* (ca. 1893),[47] showing a so-called "harem scene". While the original painting displays great detail and more figures, Tarek has moved the focus closer to the central group showing a man surrounded by women seated next to him and dancing in front of him. As the title of Tarek's painting tells us, we are supposedly witnessing a scene from the private life of *the last Islamic ruler of Granada*, Abu 'Abd Allah Muḥammad XI ("Boabdil" in Spanish sources), the ruler who lost the Islamic kingdom to the Spanish conquerors. Tarek follows the depiction of the ruler in Bouchard's painting, making him appear short and corpulent, reclining languidly on a settee. Neither the attractive young woman at his side who affectionately leans onto him and caresses him, nor the two dancers who are seductively moving in front of him with their bellies exposed seem to be able to revive him from his daze. In short, he could hardly be further away from an energetic ruler apt at defending his realm against invaders. While Bouchard's original painting depicts an unknown pasha in his "harem", enjoying its pleasures and as such falls into the category of the more racist depictions of "decadent Orientals", Tarek has by virtue of the title of the painting offered an indication of his intended message: As Silvia Naef has pointed out on several occasions, rather than presenting an erotic fantasy, the painter's aim was to point towards the decadent lifestyle of the last Arab ruler of al-Andalus as the cause that led to the loss of the realm to the Catholic Kings.[48] Tawfiq Tarek here uses an historical theme to offer a parallel for his contemporaries: Just as the decadence of the historical ruler resulted in the fall of his kingdom, so it has been the idleness of the Arab notables of their own present that was to blame for the perceived sad state of contemporary Arab societies. Thus, we can read Tawfiq Tarek's use of an Orientalist trope as a "wake-up call" to his contemporaries, a call for action to save the Arab societies and to get rid of incapable leaders and to cast off old and harmful habits.

Referring to Orientalist tropes to articulate critique of contemporary social mores was not common among pioneering Arab painters. However, in 1929, the Lebanese painter Moustafa Farroukh produced an oil painting with the title *The Two Prisoners* that shows a semi-nude woman in her private, luxurious domestic surroundings gazing idly at a bird in a cage. The pose of the woman is clearly derived from the Orientalist odalisque motif and her luxurious salon equally points towards European Orientalist conventions. But just as with Tawfiq Tarek's

**47** The painting is now in the Musée d'Orsay in Paris: http://www.musee-orsay.fr/fr/collections/catalogue-des-oeuvres/notice.html?no_cache=1&nnumid=001462&cHash=e54f2d6635, accessed 06 April 2016.

**48** Naef 2002: 225.

painting, Farroukh's intention was diametrically opposed to that of the classical Orientalists. As outlined by Kirsten Scheid, Farroukh's painting was intended as a "mirror" to the Beirut audience and was meant to provoke a reflexion on conceptions of citizenship and gender roles.[49] Through the painting and its title, chosen for didactic purposes, Farroukh sought to inspire a wish for societal change and a modern outlook among his audience. However, despite the common use of Orientalist conventions, the two paintings are quite distinct, as are their intended messages. Where Moustafa Farroukh is concerned with inspiring social change, Tawfiq Tarek's picture is a critique of a perceived political stasis and Arab leaders' incapacities. Both artists, however, act as social educators and seek to guide their audiences towards particular conclusions through their chosen titles.

Tawfiq Tarek used history as a kind of allegory for the present in some works. The painting *Ma'rakat Hittin* (The Battle of Hittin)[50] has as its theme the decisive victory of Salah al-Din al-Ayyubi (Saladin) over the crusaders, commonly perceived as an important and glorious moment of Arab history. The painting, begun shortly before the painter's death in 1940 and left unfinished, to be completed by his student Zuhair Al-Sabban,[51] is today located in the presidential palace in Damascus. It is a monumental-looking work with a pyramidal composition at the centre showing the ongoing battle. It is dominated by Saladin on a white horse engaging in battle with his adversary on a brown horse. A smaller group of soldiers on horseback is seen at the upper right side of the painting, advancing towards the scene of fighting. Castles on hilltops and smaller groups of soldiers engaged in battle are seen in the distance. At first sight, the painting appears as a quite conventional history painting, more precisely a battle scene of a type common in Western art history. Tarek is here moving within the conventions of the genre, showing scenes of dramatic action with a focus on heroic individuals that is not necessarily historically exact.[52] The thematic choice of Saladin and his victory is linked to ideas common among Arab and Muslim intellectuals in the late nineteenth century and early twentieth centuries. Knowledge of the heroes of one's own history and pride in their deeds was to be fostered among the youth and would help the Arabs to overcome European domination.[53] This idea was reflected in the movement in Arab

**49** Scheid 2010: 204, fig. 1, 217–218.

**50** Maari 2006: 447, Pl. 57; Hussam Al-Din/Abu Ayyash 1988: 27. Dimensions unknown.

**51** Al-Sharif 1984–85: 16. Walid Sawwan seems to imply a slightly earlier date during the French Mandate, without offering a specific year for the painting. See Sawwan 2011.

**52** Conn 2002: 25.

**53** Ende 1984: 70.

painting that is sometimes referred to as "classicist", in which painters sought to depict important moments of Arab history.[54] Saladin had a particular significance in the context of the French mandate in Syria and became a symbol of both the resistance to the French presence and the humiliation of the country. A commonly told anecdote recounts how the French high commissioner, General Gouraud, visited the tomb of Saladin upon entering Damascus, curtly declaring, "Saladin, nous voilà!"[55]

When Tawfiq Tarek evokes the Ayyubid hero and his victory in 1940, at a time where France was engaged with its own struggle of the Second World War, he seems to wish to remind his fellow Syrians that even the mightiest power can be defeated and that independence from foreign domination is possible now, just as it was in history. He sought to establish a connection between the historical event and the contemporary world, to express an essential lesson that is to be learned from history. History painting often functions along such lines, i. e. "not simply as an attempt to record on canvas important historical moments for their own sake, but as a way of using particular kinds of events to express 'truth' as defined by a specific historical consciousness."[56] *Ma'rakat Hittin* might look like a classical history painting, but painted as it was as a powerful act of resistance against the French presence in Syria, it represents a highly political and critical work of art. This, however, did not prevent its subsequent re-reading and re-appropriation by the Ba'th party, more than twenty years after its realization, in order to fit the ideological identification of Hafez Al-Assad with the medieval hero Saladin. This is likely to explain the present location of *Ma'rakat Hittin* in the presidential palace in Damascus.[57]

If the style of the *ruwwad* has been described as derivative and out of touch with the artistic developments of their times, I would like to argue that the use of academic styles was a deliberate choice in the case of Tawfiq Tarek. Paralleling Wendy Shaw's observations concerning Ottoman artists' lack of engagement with radical aspects of modern art, the project pursued by the Arab *ruwwad* artists was different from the one pursued by the European artistic avant-garde: the artistic modernity they sought was a particular one that could be applied to

**54** Al-Sharif 1984–85: 10. The term "classicist" is here somewhat misleading as it does not, as in European art history, designate an intellectual, cultural and artistic movement that turned towards Greco-Roman Antiquity for inspiration.

**55** "Saladin, here we are!"

**56** Conn 2002: 24.

**57** The relation of the painting to Ba'th party ideology will be treated more thoroughly in my forthcoming PhD thesis, see above, footnote 6.

their local situation, a mode of art the broader public could relate to, not one that had the aim to shock this audience or distract it from the central message of their works.[58] Oil painting was established as an index of "modernity" in the Arab world, something that was regarded as desirable.[59] By negotiating critical matters in a medium viewed positively by his audience, Tawfiq Tarek sought to introduce his critical ideas. As mentioned above, the reflection on history and its lessons was an important aspect of the modernization project in the Arab world, and here the academic genres of history painting and Orientalism seem to have offered Tawfiq Tarek particularly viable models to follow. Tarek (and this would also be the case of other Arab artists of his generation) would have had no interest in provoking and alienating his audiences, quite the contrary. His project was one of progress towards a "modern" Arab/Syrian society and paintings that pointed towards intellectual discussions that his audience would have been familiar with was a powerful ally.[60]

## 5 Art and commitment in Syria

In this article, I have chosen to discuss two works of Tawfiq Tarek's that at least partly place his oeuvre in the context of "committed" art. While Tarek was recognized by later art historians and critics as one of the most important *ruwwad* painters and his nationalist leanings were sometimes mentioned, it is the aesthetic aspects that have received most attention in later discussions of his work.[61] And as mentioned above, he was mainly seen as a skilled imitator of European styles. However, as I have discussed, the political and social ramifications of Tawfiq Tarek's work allow us to view it as "committed" in the sense outlined by Pascal Ory and Jean-Francois Sirinelli,[62] namely to define a general stance of the artists as being actively engaged with their time and society. Similar ideas also developed in Syria, although at a later stage, as is illustrated by the following quote of the painter Louay Kayyali (1934–1978): "...an artist has to be committed not only in his production but in his life as a whole, affirming the reality of his people and his nation and expressing their hopes for a better life, because he is of them and belongs to humanity, as long as art is honesty in

**58** Shaw 2011: 129.

**59** See e. g. Naef 2003: 149–150.

**60** According to the Damascene gallerist Mouna Atassi, Tawfiq Tarek moved in intellectual circles, among whom discussions on the role of art in instigating societal change were common.

**61** See e. g. Al-Sharif 1984–85: 14–16; Qashlan 2006: 14–20; Sawwan 2011.

**62** Cf. footnote 46.

expression about an outer world through the inner world of the artist. Thus, a work of art will not become eternal, unless it is closely tied to a [worldly, everyday] reality and its era."[63]

When considering the subject of artistic commitment in Syria – a question which became crucial after the period of the *ruwwad* -, it is important to note that the notion of "committed art" (French *l'art engagé*) and its Arabic equivalent *al-fann al-multazim* is not an unproblematic term in the context of the Arab world, as it has too often been (mis)used by people in power. Particularly in the late 1960s, following the defeat of 1967 and the general climate of depression, artists in several Arab countries had called for a new way of perceiving the role of the artist in society. According to this, artists should not only be active through their art, but rather express themselves as active members of society and partake in the political life of their nation. Art should have a social function and transmit messages.[64]

This idea, which had a high subversive potential and was developed by artists as a reaction to a changing social and political environment, was soon taken over by ideologists of Arab regimes and subsequently turned into a parody of itself. Authoritarian regimes called upon their artists to "educate the masses", thereby following not their (i. e. the artists') own convictions, but rather the regulations of the respective Ministries of Culture. In Syria, the Ministry of Culture called for a general cultural outlook to "develop Pan-Arab awareness and help citizens to improve their social standing, boost their morale and strengthen their sense of responsibility, and motivate them to cooperate, make sacrifices and intensify efforts to serve their country and humanity".[65]

While no particular style was prescribed in the Arab countries as it was in the Soviet Union, certain styles were preferable to others: abstraction was generally frowned upon and seen as suspect due to its "incomprehensibility" and remoteness from the aforementioned "masses". Thus art should be figurative and with a clear message.[66] That artists felt uncomfortable with such official obligations resonates in the following words, again by Louay Kayyali: "An artist should not be asked to be committed in his production because commitment comes from deep within him."[67] Kayyali's words seem like an attempt to reclaim commitment from being taken over by the political authorities. This history of

**63** Kayyali (undated).
**64** Naef 1996: 266.
**65** Al Khatib/Yazaji 2010.
**66** Naef 1996: 280–290.
**67** Kayyali (undated).

artistic commitment in Syria and its co-option by power might explain the common hesitation among artists to use the term "committed" without careful explanation of what exactly should be understood by it. This is so even today where the term would seem to have ceased to have any significant bearing among artists and discussions related to art. Thus, in a recent personal conversation, the artist Youssef Abdelke (born 1951) expressed a view on "commitment" on the part of artists that was very close to that of Louay Kayyali cited above. Abdelke insisted that commitment should come from an artist's authentic feelings and be part of his/her entire outlook. In other words, it could not be separated from the artists' lived reality.[68]

The notion of "committed art" reflected in the observations by Louay Kayyali and Youssef Abdelke as well as the one expressed in the writings of Pascal Ory and Jean-Francois Sirinelli seem to resonate well with the intellectual outlook testified to by Tawfiq Tarek's life and work. The two paintings discussed here, *Abu 'Abd Allah as-Saghir* and *Ma'rakat Hittin*, were produced at the beginning and end of Tarek's career respectively. They therefore aptly offer a frame for this artist's commitment to the changes he wished to see in his society and to which he tirelessly applied his art. Even in his less "political" paintings, the affirmation of an Arab or Syrian identity remained central, as exemplified in his images of the *Hajj* (pilgrimage to Mecca),[69] religious festivities,[70] important sites in Syria like Palmyra[71] and iconic buildings.

While Syrian artists in general worked on very diverse themes, moments of artistic commitment can be observed in the works of numerous artists in Syria, throughout the history of art in the country. The means and media that artists have used to express their commitment to social and/or political issues have changed with time and often, especially under the Ba'th regime, artists have been obliged to wrap critique in metaphorical language in order to circumvent censorship.[72] But I would argue that while styles have been subject to great change throughout Syrian art history, a strong commitment of artists to current issues of their contemporary societal and political situation runs like a common theme through this history. This aspect allows us to see a continuity in the history of art in Syria.

**68** Interview with author, Beirut, April 2014. Similar views were expressed by other artists in Syria on several occasions during my research in Syria 2007–2010.

**69** Atassi 1998: 66. Here, falsely labelled as "Hittin Battle".

**70** E.g. Mawled (The Prophet's Birthday Celebration), Atassi 1998: 64.

**71** Atassi 1998: 67.

**72** This particular aspect of artistic production in Syria during the late period of the regime of Hafiz Al-Assad is discussed at length in Cooke 2007.

## 6 Closing remarks

In this article I have discussed Tawfiq Tarek as an early example of a "committed" artist, understood as an artist who through his life and work was actively engaged with his time and society. Tarek's work is not normally discussed from this angle, the focus being placed on other aspects of his work. It is usually either discussed in purely aesthetic terms or else the emphasis is on his role as an important *ruwwad* artist, even as the first who introduced European style easel painting to Syria. While his nationalist sympathies are sometimes noted, the particular cultural context of Tawfiq Tarek's artistic production is left uncommented.

And yet, delving deeper into the layers of cultural and historical context would benefit our understanding not only of this particular artist, but also of the multi-ethical and multi-national *milieu* of late Ottoman artistic and intellectual production, as well as of the generation of Arab *ruwwad* artists. As I have attempted to show through the example of Tawfiq Tarek, the "conservative" character of his stylistic choices should not distract us from recognizing him as an artist who was strongly engaged with his time and society and who, through his art, sought to provoke reflexion on current issues among his audience and inspire societal change. These aspects of the life and work of Tawfiq Tarek place him as the first in a tradition of "committed" artists in Syria, who throughout the changes in political regimes and social environment have shown similar concerns. The perspective of "committed" art allows us to recognize a certain continuity throughout the history of art in Syria, despite shifting stylistic tastes and aesthetic preoccupations.

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